

# 1 Moving Toward Conflict

**LEARN ABOUT** the early measures the United States took to stop the spread of communism in Vietnam

**TO UNDERSTAND** how America slowly became involved in a war in Vietnam.

## TERMS & NAMES

- Ho Chi Minh
- Vietminh
- domino theory
- Dien Bien Phu
- Geneva Accords
- Ngo Dinh Diem
- Vietcong
- Ho Chi Minh Trail
- Tonkin Gulf Resolution

## ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

On the morning of September 26, 1945, Lieutenant Colonel A. Peter Dewey, the son of an Illinois congressman, was on his way to the Saigon airport in the Southeast Asian country of Vietnam. Only 28, Dewey served in the Office of Strategic Services, the chief intelligence-gathering body of the U.S. military and forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. Dewey had gone to Vietnam, which had recently been freed from Japanese rule during World War II, to assess what was becoming an explosive situation.

The Vietnamese, who had resisted Japanese occupation, now were preparing to fight the French. France, which until World War II had ruled Vietnam and its surrounding countries, sought—with British aid—to regain control of the region. Dewey saw nothing but disaster in this plan. “Cochinchina [southern Vietnam] is burning,” he reported, “the French and British are finished here, and we [the United States] ought to clear out of Southeast Asia.”

On his way to the airport, Dewey encountered a roadblock manned by several Vietnamese soldiers and made the fatal mistake of shouting at them in French. Presumably mistaking him for a French soldier, the Vietnamese guards shot him in the head. A. Peter Dewey, whose body was never recovered, was thus the first American to die in Vietnam.

Unfortunately, Dewey would not be the last. As Vietnam's independence effort came under Communist influence, the United States grew increasingly concerned about the small country's future. Eventually, America would fight a war to halt the spread of communism in Vietnam. The war would claim the lives of almost 60,000 Americans and more than 1.5 million Vietnamese. It also would divide the American nation as no other event since the Civil War.



Lieutenant Colonel  
A. Peter Dewey

## The Roots of American Involvement

America's involvement in Vietnam began in 1950, during the French Indochina War, the name given to France's attempt to reestablish its rule in Vietnam after World War II. Seeking to strengthen its ties with France and help fight the spread of communism, the United States provided the French with massive amounts of economic and military support.

**FRENCH RULE IN VIETNAM** From the late 1800s until World War II—when the Japanese took over the area—France ruled Indochina, which consisted of Vietnam and neighboring Laos and Cambodia. French colonists took much of the land from the peasants and built large plantations, from which they extracted a large portion of the country's rice and rubber for their own profit. This situation sparked growing unrest among Vietnamese peasants, which in turn prompted a harsh French response. French rulers restricted freedom of speech and assembly and jailed many Vietnamese nationalists. These measures, however, failed to curb all dissent, as the Vietnamese staged several revolts and strikes during the 1930s.

The Indochinese Communist Party, founded in 1930, organized most of the uprisings. The party's leader was **Ho Chi Minh**, a thin, middle-aged man who sported a trademark goatee. Ho Chi Minh, whom the French had condemned to

death in 1930 for his rebellious activity, fled Vietnam that year. However, throughout the 1930s, Ho Chi Minh orchestrated Vietnam's growing independence movement from exile in the Soviet Union and later from China.

In 1941, a year after the Japanese took control of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh returned home. That year, the Vietnamese Communists combined with other nationalist groups to form an organization called the **Vietminh**. The group sought Vietnam's independence from foreign rule. When the Allied defeat of Japan in August of 1945 forced the Japanese to leave Vietnam, that goal suddenly seemed a reality. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh stood in the middle of a huge crowd in the northern city of Hanoi and declared Vietnam an independent nation.

**FRANCE BATTLES THE VIETMINH** France, however, had no intention of relinquishing its former colony. French troops moved back into Vietnam in 1946, eventually driving the Vietminh out of the cities and regaining control of the country's southern half. Ho Chi Minh vowed to fight from the North to liberate the South from French control. "If ever the tiger pauses," Ho had said, referring to the Vietminh, "the elephant [France] will impale him on his mighty tusks. But the tiger will not pause, and the elephant will die of exhaustion and loss of blood."

In 1950, the United States entered the Vietnam struggle. That year, President Truman sent nearly \$15 million in economic aid to France. Over the next four years the United States paid for much of France's war, pumping nearly \$2.6 billion into the effort to defeat a man America had once supported. Ironically, during World War II, the United States had forged an alliance with Ho Chi Minh, supplying him with aid to resist the Japanese.

By 1950, however, Cold War fever had gripped much of the world. China and Eastern Europe had fallen to the Communists, and Korea appeared to be next. America saw a dual benefit in supporting France: maintaining an ally against the growing Soviet presence in Europe, and helping to stop another Asian country from turning Communist. While Ho Chi Minh promoted his cause as one of independence, the United States now saw their one-time ally as a Communist aggressor.

**THE VIETMINH DRIVE OUT THE FRENCH** Upon entering the White House in 1953, President Eisenhower continued the policy of supplying aid to the French war effort. By this time, the United States had settled for a stalemate with the Communists in Korea, which only stiffened America's resolve to halt the spread of communism. During a news conference in 1954, Eisenhower explained the **domino theory**, in which he likened the countries on the brink of communism to a row of dominoes, waiting to fall one after the other. "You have a row of dominoes set up," the president said. "You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly."

Despite massive U.S. aid, however, the French could not retake Vietnam. The final blow came in May of 1954, when the Vietminh overran the French outpost at **Dien Bien Phu**, in northwestern Vietnam. Led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietminh surrounded the fort and pounded it with heavy artillery for nearly two months. Major Paul Grauwin of the French Army described the outpost's morgue on the first night of heavy bombardment.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

The square hole was full [of dead]; outside, between the hole and the barbed wire, there were a hundred corpses, pell-mell, thrown on stretchers or onto the ground, stiffened in grotesque or tragic positions. Some were wrapped and tied in their tent cloth; others were dressed in their combat uniforms, motionless in the pose where death had surprised them.

MAJOR PAUL GRAUWIN, quoted in *Dien Bien Phu*

## KEY PLAYER



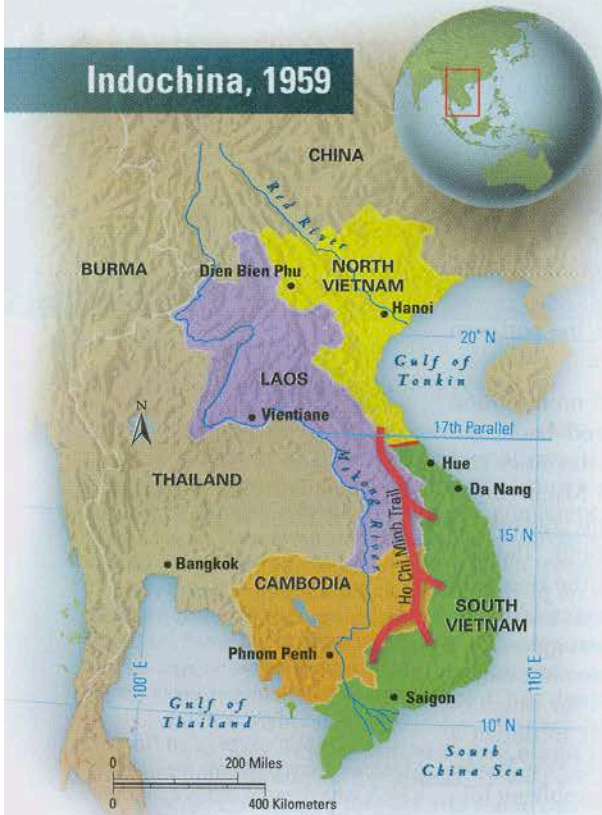
**HO CHI MINH**  
1890–1969

Born Nguyen Tat Thanh to a poor family, Ho Chi Minh (which means "He Who Enlightens") found early work as a cook on a French steamship, which allowed him to visit such cities as Boston and New York. During World War I, Ho Chi Minh moved to France, where he worked as a gardener, waiter, photo retoucher, and oven stoker.

Ho Chi Minh, who ruled North Vietnam from 1954 until his death in 1969, was revered by his countrymen as the benevolent "Uncle Ho." During his reign, however, he advocated one-party rule and repressed all opposition.

The Communist ruler's name lived on after his death. In 1975, the North Vietnamese Army conquered South Vietnam and changed the name of the South's capital from Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City.

## Indochina, 1959



### GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER

**MOVEMENT** Through which countries did the Ho Chi Minh Trail pass? **LOCATION** How might North Vietnam's location better enable it to get aid from its ally, China?

The Vietcong saw the United States and South Vietnam as oppressors. This Vietcong propaganda poster reads, "Better death than slavery."



After the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the French surrendered and began to pull out of Vietnam. From May through July 1954, the countries of France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States, China, Laos, and Cambodia met in Geneva, Switzerland, with the Vietminh and with the South Vietnam's anti-Communist nationalists to hammer out a peace agreement. The **Geneva Accords** temporarily divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel. The Communists and their leader, Ho Chi Minh, controlled North Vietnam from the capital of Hanoi. The anti-Communist nationalists controlled South Vietnam from the port city of Saigon. An election to unify the country was called for in 1956.

## The United States Steps In

In the wake of France's retreat, the United States took a more active role in halting the spread of communism in Vietnam. Wading deeper into the country's affairs, the administrations of President Eisenhower and then President John F. Kennedy provided economic and military aid to South Vietnam's non-Communist regime.

**DIEM CANCELS ELECTIONS** Although he directed a brutal and repressive regime, Ho Chi Minh won popular support in the North by breaking up large estates and redistributing land to peasants. Moreover, his years of fighting the Japanese and French had made him a national hero. Recognizing Ho Chi Minh's widespread popularity, South Vietnam's president, **Ngo Dinh Diem**,

a strong anti-Communist, refused to take part in the countrywide election of 1956. The United States also sensed that a countrywide election might spell victory for Ho Chi Minh and therefore supported the cancellation of elections. The Eisenhower administration promised military aid and training to Diem in return for a stable reform government in the South.

Diem, however, failed to hold up his end of the bargain. He ushered in a corrupt government that suppressed opposition of any kind and offered little or no land distribution to peasants. In addition, Diem, a devout Catholic, angered the country's large Buddhist population by restricting Buddhist practices.

By 1957, a Communist group in the South, known as the **Vietcong**, had begun attacks on the Diem government, assassinating thousands of South Vietnamese government officials. While the group would later be called the National Liberation Front (NLF), the United States continued to refer to the guerrilla fighters as the Vietcong.

Ho Chi Minh expressed his support for the group, which had strong Communist ties. In 1959, Ho Chi Minh began supplying military arms to the Vietcong from North Vietnam via a network of paths along the border of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that became known as the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**. (See map above.) As the guerrilla attacks increased, South Vietnam grew more unstable. The Eisenhower administration took little action, however, deciding to "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem."

**KENNEDY AND VIETNAM** The Kennedy administration, which entered the White House in 1961, also chose initially to "swim" with Diem. However, Kennedy was wary of accusations that Democrats were "soft" on

**Skillbuilder Answer:** Movement: Laos and Cambodia. Location: Possible response: China could easily deliver military and other supplies to North Vietnam.

**THINK THROUGH IT B. Analyzing Causes** With the United States support the cancellation of Vietnam's 1956 election!

**B. Answer:** Because it appeared that Chi Minh would win the election and possibly Vietnam would become communist.

communism. Therefore, he increased financial aid to Diem's teetering regime and sent thousands of military advisers to help train South Vietnamese troops in their battle against the NLF. By the end of 1963, almost 16,000 U.S. military personnel were in South Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Diem's popularity plummeted because of ongoing corruption and lack of land reform. To combat the growing Vietcong presence in the South's countryside, the Diem administration initiated the strategic hamlet program, which meant moving all villagers to protected areas. Many Vietnamese deeply resented being moved from their home villages where they had lived for generations and where ancestors were buried.

Diem also intensified his attack on Buddhism. Fed up with continuing Buddhist demonstrations, the South Vietnamese ruler imprisoned hundreds of Buddhist clerics and destroyed their temples. To protest, several Buddhist monks and nuns publicly burned themselves to death. Horrified, American officials urged Diem to stop the persecutions, but Diem refused.

It had become clear that for South Vietnam to remain stable, Diem would have to go. On November 1, 1963, a U.S.-supported military coup toppled Diem's regime. Against Kennedy's wishes, Diem was executed. A few weeks later, Kennedy too fell to an assassin's bullet. The presidency—along with the growing crisis in Vietnam—now belonged to Lyndon B. Johnson.



A Buddhist monk sets himself on fire in a busy Saigon intersection in 1963 as a protest against the Diem regime.

**WHICH HISTORY**  
Summarizing  
Why was the  
regime so  
unpopular?

**C. Answer**  
Corruption,  
repressive  
policies, and  
execution of  
Buddhists.

## President Johnson Expands the Conflict

Shortly before his death, Kennedy had announced his intent to withdraw U.S. forces from South Vietnam. "In the final analysis, it's their war," he declared. Whether Kennedy would have in fact withdrawn from Vietnam remains a matter of debate. However, Lyndon Johnson escalated—or increased—the nation's role in Vietnam and eventually began what would become America's longest war.

**THE SOUTH GROWS MORE UNSTABLE** Diem's death brought more chaos to South Vietnam. A string of military leaders attempted to lead the country, but each regime was more unstable and inefficient than Diem's had been. Meanwhile, the Vietcong's influence in the countryside steadily grew.

To President Johnson, a Communist takeover of South Vietnam would be disastrous. As a Democratic president, Lyndon Johnson was particularly sensitive to being perceived as "soft" on communism. A Democrat, Harry Truman, had been president when China fell to the Communist Party in 1948, unleashing charges by some Republicans that the Democrats had "lost" China. In addition, many of Senator Joseph McCarthy's charges during the 1950s of Communist infiltrators in America had been directed against Democrats. For these political reasons, Johnson wanted to avoid being accused of "losing" Vietnam. "If I . . . let the Communists take over South Vietnam," Johnson said, "then . . . my nation would be seen as an appeaser, and we would find it impossible to accomplish anything . . . anywhere on the entire globe."

"All the News  
That's Fit to Print"

# The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 5, 1964  
NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 5, 1964  
VOL. CXXIII—No. 28,910  
© 1964 by The New York Times Company  
TEN CENTS

## U.S. PLANES ATTACK NORTH VIETNAM BASES; PRESIDENT ORDERS 'LIMITED' RETALIATION AFTER COMMUNISTS' PT BOATS RENEW RAIDS



A newspaper headline announces the U.S. military's reaction to the Gulf of Tonkin incident. During Operation Rolling Thunder, which followed, U.S. planes called Thunderchiefs dropped 750-pound bombs on Vietnamese targets.

### THE TONKIN GULF RESOLUTION

On August 4, 1964, President Johnson announced that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked an American destroyer, the U.S.S. *Maddox*, which was patrolling in the Gulf of Tonkin off the North Vietnamese coast. The North Vietnamese charged that the U.S. ship was conducting a naval raid. Nonetheless, the North Vietnamese denied attacking the U.S. ship.

Despite a great deal of confusion surrounding the details, this incident, along with a second alleged attack,

against the *Maddox* and another destroyer, the U.S.S. *C. Turner Joy*, prompted Johnson to launch bombing attacks on North Vietnam. He also asked Congress for powers to take "all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." Congress overwhelmingly approved Johnson's request. With the House voting 414-0 and the Senate voting 88-2, Congress adopted on August 7 the **Tonkin Gulf Resolution**. While not a declaration of war, it granted Johnson broad military powers in Vietnam.

As one of only two senators to vote against the resolution, Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska warned that "all Vietnam is not worth the life of a single American boy." However, Representative Ross Adair of Indiana spoke for the overwhelming majority of Congress when he declared, "The American flag has been fired upon. We will not and cannot tolerate such things."

In February of 1965, President Johnson used his newly granted powers. In response to a Vietcong attack that killed eight Americans, Johnson unleashed Operation Rolling Thunder, the first sustained bombing of North Vietnam. In March of that year the first American combat troops began arriving in South Vietnam. By June, more than 50,000 U.S. soldiers were battling the Vietcong. The Vietnam War had become Americanized.

D. Answer to Johnson's authority to use America's military in the war.

THINK THROUGH IT  
D. Answer to Causes from the Tonkin Gulf Resolution led to greater U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

# U.S. Involvement and Escalation

## TERMS & NAMES

- Robert McNamara
- Dean Rusk
- William Westmoreland
- napalm
- Agent Orange
- search-and-destroy mission
- credibility gap

**LEARN ABOUT** the reasons for U.S. escalation and the difficulty the United States encountered in fighting the Vietcong

**TO UNDERSTAND** why the war lasted longer than expected and began to lose support at home.

## ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

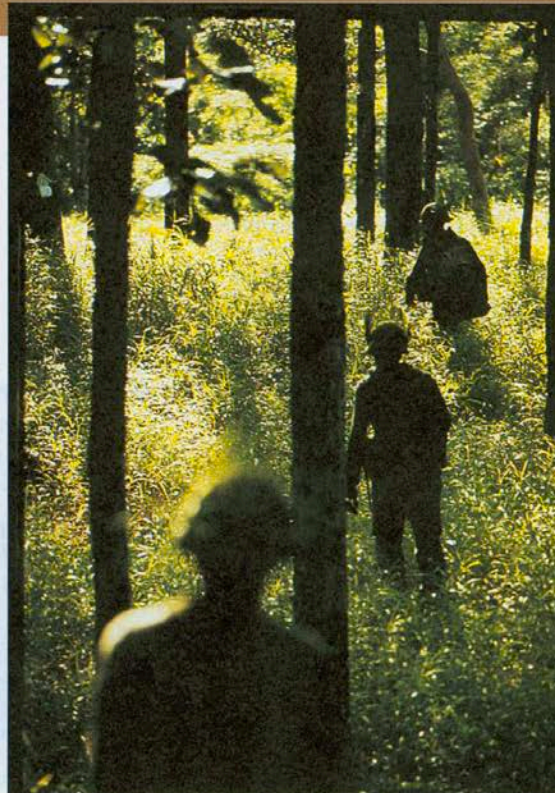
Tim O'Brien, born in Austin, Minnesota, is a novelist who has written several books about his experience in Vietnam. O'Brien was drafted and sent to Vietnam in August of 1968, when he was 22. He spent the first seven months of his nearly two-year duty patrolling the fields outside of Chu Lai, a sea-coast city in South Vietnam. O'Brien described one of the more nerve-racking experiences of the war: walking through the fields and jungles, many of which were filled with land mines and booby traps.

### A PERSONAL VOICE

You do some thinking. You hallucinate. You look ahead a few paces and wonder what your legs will resemble if there is more to the earth in that spot than silicates and nitrogen. Will the pain be unbearable? Will you scream and fall silent? Will you be afraid to look at your own body, afraid of the sight of your own red flesh and white bone? . . .

It is not easy to fight this sort of self-defeating fear, but you try. You decide to be ultra-careful—the hard-nosed realistic approach. You try to second-guess the mine. Should you put your foot to that flat rock or the clump of weeds to its rear? Paddy dike or water? You wish you were Tarzan, able to swing on the vines. You trace the footprints of the men to your front. You give up when he curses you for following too closely; better one man dead than two.

TIM O'BRIEN, quoted in *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam*



Deadly traps were just some of the obstacles that U.S. troops faced in Vietnam as their attempt to defeat a resilient guerrilla army evolved into a bloody stalemate. As the influx of American ground troops into Vietnam failed to score a quick victory over the Communists, a mostly supportive U.S. population began to question its government's war policy.

U.S. soldiers on patrol in Vietnam, November 1965.

## The Decision to Escalate

Much of the nation supported Lyndon Johnson's determination to contain communism in Vietnam. Therefore, President Johnson began sending large numbers of American troops to fight alongside the South Vietnamese Army against the forces of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army.

**STRONG SUPPORT FOR CONTAINMENT** In the 1964 presidential election, Lyndon Johnson soundly defeated his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater. Johnson's victory was due in part to charges that Goldwater was an extreme anti-Communist who might push the United States into war with the Soviet Union. In contrast to Goldwater's heated, warlike language, Johnson's speeches were more moderate, yet he spoke determinedly about containing communism.

Even after Congress had approved the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, President Johnson voiced his opposition to sending U.S. ground troops to Vietnam. He

## HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

### GENERAL WILLIAM WESTMORELAND

General Westmoreland retired from the military in 1972, but even in retirement, he could not escape the Vietnam War.

In 1982, almost seven years after the conflict had ended, CBS-TV aired a documentary entitled *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*. The report, viewed by millions, asserted that General Westmoreland and the Pentagon had deceived the U.S. government about the enemy's size and strength during 1967 and 1968 to make it appear that U.S. forces were winning the war.

Westmoreland, claiming he was the victim of "distorted, false, and specious information . . . derived by sinister deception," filed a \$120 million libel suit against CBS. The widely publicized suit was

eventually settled, with both parties issuing statements pledging mutual respect. CBS, however, stood by its story.



declared in 1964 that he was "not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

However, in March of 1965, that is precisely what the president did. Working closely with his foreign-policy advisers, particularly Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** and Secretary of State **Dean Rusk**, President Johnson began dispatching tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to fight in Vietnam. While some Americans viewed Johnson's decision as contradictory to his position during the presidential campaign, most saw the president as following an established and popular policy of confronting communism anywhere in the world. That same year, for example, the Johnson administration also dispatched U.S. troops to the Dominican Republic, a small country in the Caribbean, to put down a rebellion the administration feared was Communist-inspired.

So, as American soldiers stepped onto the planes that would take them to fight in the thick jungles of Southeast Asia, Congress, as well as many Americans, strongly supported Johnson's strategy. A 1965 poll showed that 61 percent of Americans supported the U.S. policy in Vietnam, while only 24 percent opposed it.

To be sure, there were dissenters in the Johnson administration. In October of 1964, Undersecretary of State George Ball had argued against escalation, warning that "once on the tiger's back, we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount." However, the president's closest advisers strongly urged escalation, believing the defeat of communism in Vietnam to be of vital importance to the future of America and the world. Dean Rusk stressed this view in a 1965 memo to President Johnson.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war. So long as the South Vietnamese are prepared to fight for themselves, we cannot abandon them without disaster to peace and to our interests throughout the world.

DEAN RUSK, quoted in *In Retrospect*

**THE TROOP BUILDUP ACCELERATES** By the end of 1965, the U.S. government had sent more than 180,000 Americans to Vietnam. The American commander in South Vietnam, General **William Westmoreland**, continued to request more troops. Westmoreland, a tall and lean West Point graduate who served in World War II and Korea, was less than impressed with the fighting ability of the South Vietnamese Army, or the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The ARVN "cannot stand up to this pressure without substantial U.S. combat support on the ground," the general reported. "The only possible response is the aggressive deployment of U.S. troops." Throughout the early years of the war, the Johnson administration complied with Westmoreland's requests, and by 1967, the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam had climbed to about 500,000.

## A War in the Jungle

The United States entered the war in Vietnam believing that its superior weaponry would lead it to victory over the Vietcong. However, the jungle terrain and the enemy's guerrilla tactics soon turned the war into a frustrating stalemate.

**AN ELUSIVE ENEMY** Because the Vietcong lacked the high-powered weaponry of the American forces, they used hit-and-run and ambush tactics, as well as a keen knowledge of the jungle terrain, to their advantage. Moving

**TRUMP**  
A. Comm  
What other  
opinion of  
Johnson  
have the  
Vietnam?

A. Ameri  
argued  
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**LAND MINES**

The destructiveness of land mines still plagues much of the world today. As a result of past and present wars, roughly 110 million mines were still scattered throughout 64 countries in 1996. That year, nearly 2,000 victims lost either a limb or their life to a land mine each month. In Vietnam and Cambodia, more than 10 million mines remained in the ground.

Various relief, religious, and veterans organizations have urged the international community to ban the use of mines. The Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, a group formed to examine the causes and consequences of the Vietnam War, has taken additional measures. Since 1991, it has supplied prosthetic limbs for Vietnamese and Cambodian mine victims.

secretly in and out of the general population, the Vietcong destroyed the notion of a frontline by attacking U.S. troops in both the cities and the countryside. Because some of the enemy lived amidst the civilian population, it became increasingly difficult for U.S. troops to discern friend from foe. A woman selling soft drinks to U.S. soldiers might be a Vietcong spy. A boy standing on the corner might be ready to throw a grenade.

In addition, the enemy laced the terrain with countless booby traps and land mines. American soldiers marching through South Vietnam's jungles and rice paddies dealt not only with sweltering heat and leeches but also with deadly traps. The enemy even turned U.S. weapons against the Americans. In a 1969 letter to his sister, Specialist Fourth Class Salvador Gonzalez described the tragic result from an unexploded U.S. bomb that the North Vietnamese Army had rigged.

**A PERSONAL VOICE**

Two days ago 4 guys got killed and about 15 wounded from the first platoon. Our platoon was 200 yards away on top of a hill. One guy was from Floral Park [in New York City]. He had five days left to go [before being sent home]. He was standing on a 250-lb. bomb that a plane had dropped and didn't explode. So the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] wired it up. Well, all they found was a piece of his wallet.

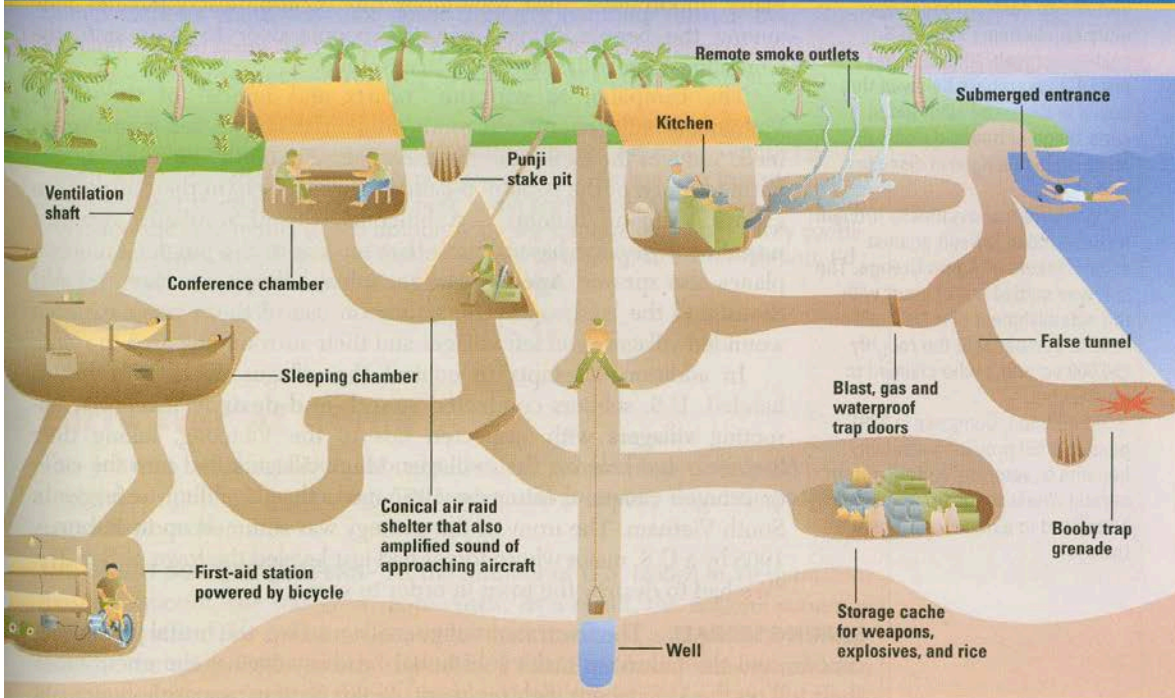
**SALVADOR GONZALEZ**, quoted in *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*

Adding to the enemy's elusiveness was a network of elaborate tunnels that allowed the Vietcong to launch surprise attacks on American soldiers and then disappear quickly. The Vietnamese, who began building the tunnels during their war with the French, constructed even more in response to the massive U.S. bombings. The tunnels, which connected villages throughout the countryside, became home to many guerrilla fighters. Inside their underground world, the Vietcong ate and slept, stored munitions, built land mines, and treated their wounded. "The more the Americans tried to drive us

**SKILLBUILDER  
INTERPRETING CHARTS**

*How were the Vietcong able to sustain themselves underground for such long periods of time?*

**Tunnels of the Vietcong**



away from our land, the more we burrowed into it," recalled Major Nguyen Quot of the Vietcong Army.

**A FRUSTRATING WAR OF ATTRITION** Not only may the United States have underestimated the Vietcong's ingenuity, but it also miscalculated the enemy's resolve. Westmoreland's strategy for defeating the Vietcong was to destroy their morale through a war of attrition, or the gradual wearing down of the enemy by continuous harassment. Introducing the concept of the body count, or the tracking of Vietcong killed in battle, the general believed that as the number of Vietcong dead rose, the enemy's surrender would become inevitable.

However, the Vietcong had no intention of quitting their fight. What Ho Chi Minh had told the French in the 1940s applied also to the Americans, "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours," he warned, "but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win." Despite absorbing significant casualties and the relentless pounding from U.S. bombers, the Vietcong—who received supplies from China and the Soviet Union—remained defiant. Defense Secretary McNamara confessed his early frustration over the Vietcong's resilience to a reporter in 1966. "I didn't think these people had the capacity to fight this way," he said. "If I had thought they would take this punishment and fight this well, . . . I would have thought differently at the start."

General Westmoreland would say later that the United States never lost a battle in Vietnam. While the general's words may have been true, they underscored the degree to which America misunderstood the Vietcong. While the United States viewed the war strictly as a military struggle, the Vietcong saw it as a battle for their very existence, and they were ready to pay any price for victory. "The Communists were prepared to go on and on," explained Stanley Karnow, author of *Vietnam: A History*, "and they had factored their human costs into the equation."

**THE BATTLE FOR "HEARTS AND MINDS"** Another key part of the American strategy was to keep the Vietcong from winning the support of South Vietnam's rural population. Edward G. Lansdale, who helped found the special fighting unit known as the Green Berets, stressed the plan's importance. "Just remember this. Communist guerrillas hide among the people. If you win the people over to your side, the Communist guerrillas have no place to hide."

The campaign to win the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese villagers proved more difficult than the Americans imagined. Some of the tactics the Americans used to battle the Vietcong also harmed much of the rural population. For instance, in their attempt to expose Vietcong tunnels and hideouts, the U.S. planes dropped **napalm**, a gasoline-based bomb that set fire to the jungle. American planes also sprayed **Agent Orange**, a leaf-killing toxic chemical that devastated the landscape. The saturation use of these weapons often wounded villagers and left villages and their surrounding area in ruins.

In addition, attempts to control the villages could turn heavy-handed. U.S. soldiers conducted **search-and-destroy missions**, uprooting villagers with suspected ties to the Vietcong, killing their livestock, and burning their villages. Many villagers fled into the cities or refugee camps, creating by 1967 more than 3 million refugees in South Vietnam. The irony of the strategy was summed up in February 1968 by a U.S. major whose forces had just leveled the town of Ben Tre: "We had to destroy the town in order to save it."

**SINKING MORALE** The frustrations of guerrilla warfare, the brutal jungle conditions, and the failure to make substantial headway against the enemy took their toll on the U.S. troops' fighting spirit. Philip Caputo, a marine lieutenant



## NOW & THEN

### AGENT ORANGE

The 13 million gallons of Agent Orange dumped on the jungles of Vietnam to destroy the foliage ended up harming some U.S. soldiers as well. After the war ended, researchers believed that toxins in the weed killer led to a wide range of health defects in humans, including skin diseases and cancer.

U.S. veterans eventually brought a class-action lawsuit against seven makers of Agent Orange. The suit was settled out of court with the establishment of a \$180 million fund to compensate the roughly 250,000 veterans who claimed to be affected.

In addition, Congress in 1991 passed a bill providing disability benefits to veterans suffering from certain illnesses that were said to be related to exposure to Agent Orange.

in Vietnam who later wrote several books about the war, summarized the soldiers' growing disillusionment, "When we marched into the rice paddies . . . we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Vietcong could be quickly beaten. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost."

Throughout the war, American morale dropped steadily, as many soldiers turned to alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs to deal with the futility of a war that seemed less and less winnable. Low morale led some soldiers even to murder their superior officers by "fragging" them, an action in which a soldier lobbed a fragmentation grenade (one that left no fingerprints) at an officer during battle. Morale would worsen during the later years of the war when soldiers realized they were fighting even as their government was negotiating for peace.

Also damaging to U.S. troop morale was the continuing corruption and instability of the South Vietnamese government. Nguyen Cao Ky, a flamboyant air force general, led the government from 1965 to 1967. Ignoring U.S. pleas to step down, Ky, who wore bright military uniforms and a thin mustache, refused to retire in favor of an elected civilian government. Mass demonstrations began, and by May of 1966, Buddhist monks were once again burning themselves in protest against the South Vietnamese government. South Vietnam was fighting a civil war within a civil war, leaving U.S. officials confused and angry. "What are we doing here?" demanded one official. "We're fighting to save these people, and they're fighting each other!"

Despite the low morale among some U.S. troops, many American soldiers fought courageously. Particularly heroic were the thousands of soldiers who endured years of torture and confinement as prisoners of war. In 1966, Navy pilot Gerald Coffee's plane was shot down during a bombing mission over North Vietnam. Coffee spent the next seven years—until he was released in 1973 as part of a cease-fire agreement—struggling to stay alive in an enemy prison camp.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

My clothes were filthy and ragged. . . . With no boots, my socks—which I'd been able to salvage—were barely recognizable. . . . Only a few threads around my toes kept them spread over my feet; some protection, at least, as I shivered through the cold nights curled up tightly on my morguelike slab. . . . My conditions and predicament were so foreign to me, so stifling, so overwhelming. I'd never been so hungry, so grimy, and in such pain.

GERALD COFFEE, *Beyond Survival*



A soldier with the 61st Infantry Division wears symbols of both war and peace on his chest.

*"We had to  
destroy the  
town in order  
to save it."*

A U.S. MAJOR IN 1968

## The Early War at Home

The Johnson administration thought the war would end quickly. When it dragged on, public support began to waver, and Johnson's domestic programs began to unravel.

**THE GREAT SOCIETY SUFFERS** As the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam continued to mount, the war grew more costly. As a result, the nation's economy began to suffer. The inflation rate, which had remained at 2 percent through most of the early 1960s, nearly tripled by 1969. President Johnson had been determined to pay for both the war and his Great Society programs.



Each night, Americans watched the images—which often were graphic and brutal—of the Vietnam War.

However, the cost of financing the Vietnam War became too great. In August of 1967, Johnson asked for a tax increase to help fund the war and to keep inflation in check. Congressional conservatives agreed, but only after demanding and receiving a \$6 billion reduction in funding for Great Society programs. Vietnam was slowly claiming an early casualty: Johnson's grand vision of domestic reform.

**THE LIVING-ROOM WAR** By 1967, a majority of Americans still supported the war. However, cracks were beginning to show. The media, mainly television, helped heighten the nation's growing concern about the war. Vietnam was America's first "living-room war," in which

footage of combat appeared nightly on the news in millions of homes. And what people saw on their television screens seemed to contradict the optimistic war scenario that the Johnson administration was painting.

Quoting body count statistics that showed large numbers of Communists dying in battle, General Westmoreland continually reported that a Vietcong surrender was imminent. Victory "lies within our grasp—the enemy's hopes are bankrupt," he declared. Defense Secretary McNamara backed up the general's rosy analyses, saying that he could see "the light at the end of the tunnel."

However, the repeated television images of Americans in body bags told a different story. Communists may have been dying, but so too were Americans—nearly 16,000 between 1965 and 1967. Critics charged that a **credibility gap** was growing between what the Johnson administration reported and what was really happening.

One such critic was Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Fulbright, a former Johnson ally, charged the president with a "lack of candor" in portraying the war effort. In early 1966, the senator conducted a series of televised committee hearings in which he called forth members of the Johnson administration to defend their Vietnam policies. The Fulbright hearings delivered few major revelations, but they did contribute to the growing doubts about the war. One housewife appeared to capture the mood of middle America when she told an interviewer, "I want to get out, but I don't want to give in."

By 1967, however, a small force outside of mainstream America, mainly from the ranks of the nation's youth, already had begun actively protesting the war. Their voices would grow louder and capture the attention of the entire nation.

D. Answer the  
continued rise  
of American  
casualties.  
television  
coverage of  
the Johnson  
administration  
growing  
credibility gap.  
THINK THROUGH IT  
D. Recognize  
Effects What  
to the growing  
concern in  
America about  
Vietnam War?

# A Nation Divided

## TERMS & NAMES

- New Left
- Students for a Democratic Society
- Free Speech Movement
- dove
- hawk

**LEARN ABOUT** the growing antiwar movement in America  
**TO UNDERSTAND** how the war sharply divided the American public.

## ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

In 1969, Stephan Gubar was told to report to his local draft board. The young man from New Jersey was being called for possible military service in Vietnam. Gubar, 22, a veteran of the civil rights movement, filed as a conscientious objector (CO), or someone who opposed war on the basis of religious or moral beliefs. Gubar was granted 1-A-O status, which meant that while he would not be forced to carry a weapon, he still qualified for noncombatant military duty. In 1969, he was drafted. Gubar did his basic training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Along with other conscientious objectors, he received special training as a medic. Gubar described the memorable day when his training ended.



Stephan Gubar

## A PERSONAL VOICE

The thing that stands out most was . . . being really scared, being in formation and listening to the names and assignments being called. The majority of COs I knew had orders cut for Vietnam. And even though I could hear that happening, even though I could hear that every time a CO's name came up, the orders were cut for Vietnam, I still thought there was a possibility I might not go. Then, when they called my name and said "Vietnam," . . . I went to a phone and I called my wife. It was a tremendous shock.

STEPHAN GUBAR, quoted in *Days of Decision*

Gubar was not alone in his anxiety. As American involvement in the Vietnam War escalated—and American casualties mounted—young men all over the country began to worry that they would be called on to fight and die in Vietnam. While many eligible young Americans proudly went off to war, some found ways to avoid serving, and still others simply refused to go. As the war progressed, it spurred a growing protest movement in America that sharply divided the country between supporters and opponents of the government's policy in Vietnam.

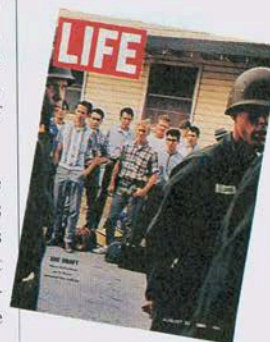
**VIDEO** **MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE:**  
*Stephan Gubar and the Vietnam War*

## A Working-Class War

The idea of fighting a war in a faraway place for what some believed was a questionable cause prompted a number of young Americans to avoid going to Vietnam. Because many middle-class and upper-class American youths were able—through college and other means—to avoid military service, most of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam were from the lower economic classes of American society.

**A "MANIPULATABLE" DRAFT** Most soldiers who fought in Vietnam were drafted into combat under the country's Selective Service System. Under this system, which had been established in the 1940s during World War II, all males had to register with their local draft boards when they turned 18. In the event of a war, the board called men between the ages of 18 and 26 into military service as they were needed. In a sign of America's growing doubts about the Vietnam War, many young men sought deferments from the draft.

Thousands of men attempted to find ways around the draft, which one man characterized as a "very manipulatable system." Because many medical excuses were honored, some men sought out sympathetic doctors to grant them medi-



A *Life* magazine cover shows new draft inductees arriving for training at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

cal deferments. Different draft boards had different qualifications, prompting some men to change residences in order to stand before more lenient boards. Some Americans even joined the National Guard or Coast Guard, which often secured a deferment from service in Vietnam.

One of the most common ways to avoid the draft was to receive a college deferment, by which a young man enrolled in a university could put off his military service. Because most university students during the 1960s were white and some were financially well-off, many of the men who fought in Vietnam were lower-class whites or minorities who were less privileged economically. To be sure, a number of Americans who were drafted proudly went to Vietnam. Others volunteered to fight, their reasons ranging from a sense of duty to a feeling of patriotism. Nonetheless, with almost 80 percent of American soldiers coming from lower economic levels, Vietnam was a working-class war.

**AFRICAN AMERICANS AND WOMEN IN VIETNAM** African Americans served in highly disproportionate numbers in Vietnam. During the first several years of the war, blacks accounted for more than 20 percent of American combat deaths despite representing only about 10 percent of the U.S. population. While the Defense Department would take steps to correct that imbalance by the end of the war, the large number of black casualties early in the war angered African-American leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. King had refrained from speaking out against the war for fear that it would divert attention away from the civil rights movement. However, he could no longer stay silent about the news he was hearing from Vietnam. In 1967 he lashed out against what he called the “cruel irony” of American blacks dying for a country that still regarded them as second-class citizens.

**A PERSONAL VOICE**

We were taking the young black men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem. . . . We have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., quoted in *America's Vietnam War: A Narrative History*

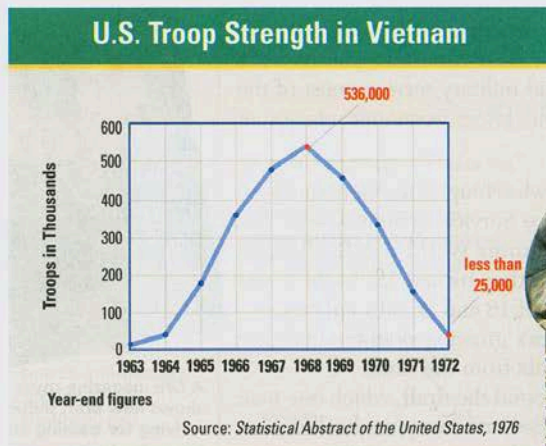
Many African Americans experienced the same racism in Vietnam that they endured at home. Throughout the war, racial tensions between white and black soldiers ran high in many platoons. In some cases, the hostility led to violence. In 1967, a race riot erupted at the U.S. Army

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**Skillbuilder Answer**  
1965 through 1968

**SKILLBUILDER**  
**INTERPRETING GRAPHS**

What years signaled a rapid increase in the deployment of U.S. troops?



Despite racial tensions, black and white soldiers fought side by side in Vietnam.

stockade at Long Binh, Vietnam. Two years later, black and white marines returning from war clashed at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The racism that gripped many military units was yet another factor that led to low troop morale in Vietnam.

While the U.S. military in the 1960s did not allow females to serve in combat, nearly 7,500 women served in Vietnam as army and navy nurses. Thousands more women volunteered their services in Vietnam to the American Red Cross and the United Services Organization (USO), which delivered hospitality and entertainment to the troops.

As the men who marched off to Vietnam fought against Communist guerrillas, some of the men who stayed home, as well as many women, waged a battle of their own. Shortly after U.S. troops began arriving in Vietnam, college campuses across the country erupted in protest as many of the nation's youths began to voice their opposition to the war.



Two U.S. nurses rest at Cam Ranh Bay, the major entry point for American supplies and troops in South Vietnam.



## The Roots of Opposition

In the years prior to America's involvement in Vietnam, an atmosphere of protest already existed in many college campuses. In contrast to the general contentment that characterized the youths of the 1950s, students in the early 1960s had become more active socially and politically. Some had participated in the civil rights struggle, while others had answered President Kennedy's call to more actively pursue public service. By the mid-sixties, many youths believed the nation to be in need of fundamental change.

**THE NEW LEFT** The growing youth movement of the 1960s became known as the **New Left**, which encompassed many different activist groups and organizations. The movement was "new" in relation to the "old left" of the 1930s, which generally tried to move the nation toward socialism, and, in some cases, communism. While the New Left movement did not preach socialism, its followers demanded sweeping changes in American society.

Voicing these demands was one of the better-known New Left organizations, **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)**. Tom Hayden and Al Haber, two University of Michigan students, founded the group in 1959. Three years later, they convened a meeting in Port Huron, Michigan, to draft the group's declaration. Known as the Port Huron Statement, it began: "We are the people of this generation, bred in at least moderate comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit." The statement, which charged that corporations and large government institutions had taken over America, called for a restoration of "participatory democracy" and greater individual freedom.

In 1964, another New Left group gained prominence with its attacks on American society. At the University of California at Berkeley, the **Free Speech Movement (FSM)**, which stemmed from a clash between students and administrators over free speech on campus, soon focused its criticism on what it called the American "machine," the nation's faceless and powerful business and government institutions.

**CAMPUS ACTIVISM** The strategies and tactics of the FSM and SDS soon spread to colleges throughout the country. There, students addressed mostly campus issues, such as dress codes, curfews, dormitory regulations, and mandatory Reserved Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs. At Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, students marched merely as "an expression of general student discontent."

With the onset of the Vietnam War, the students suddenly found a galvanizing issue. At campuses across the country, American youths joined together to protest the war.

## The Protest Movement Emerges

Throughout the spring of 1965, a number of colleges began to host “teach-ins” to protest the war. At the University of Michigan, where only a year before, President Johnson had announced his sweeping Great Society program, teachers and students now assailed his war policy. “This is no longer a casual form of campus spring fever,” journalist James Reston noted about the growing demonstrations. As the war continued, the protests grew and divided the country between those Americans who supported their government’s policy in Vietnam and those who opposed it.

**THE MOVEMENT GROWS** In April of 1965, SDS helped organize a march on Washington, D.C., by some 20,000 protesters. By November of that year, a protest rally in Washington drew more than 30,000. Then, in January of 1966, the Johnson administration changed deferments for college students. Students now had to be in good academic standing to defer their military service. Campuses around the country erupted in protest. SDS called for civil disobedience at Selective Service Centers and openly counseled students to flee to Canada or Sweden. By the end of 1967, SDS had chapters on nearly 300 campuses.

The growing number of youths who opposed the war did so for different reasons. The most common reason for opposition was the belief that the conflict in Vietnam was basically a civil war and that the U.S. military had no business there. Others argued that the United States could not police the world and that the Vietnam War was draining American strength in important parts of the world such as Europe and the Middle East. Still others saw the war simply as morally unjust.

As the antiwar movement grew, it reached outside the college campuses and touched other groups in society. Small numbers of returning veterans also began to protest the war. Some antiwar veterans picketed the White House and tried to return their medals to President Johnson. In addition, many musicians took up the antiwar cause. Folk singers such as Peter, Paul and Mary and Joan Baez led the way as music became a popular protest vehicle. Soon protest songs even conquered the pop-music charts. Number one in September 1965 was “Eve of Destruction,” in which singer Barry McGuire stressed the ironic fact that in the 1960s an American male could be drafted at 18 but had to be 21 to vote:

*The Eastern world, it is exploding,  
Violence flaring, bullets loading,  
You're old enough to kill, but not for voting,  
You don't believe in war, but what's that gun you're toting?*

**FROM PROTEST TO RESISTANCE** From 1965 to 1967, the antiwar movement intensified. “We were having *no* effect on U.S. policy,” recalled one protest leader. “So we thought we had to up the ante.” In the spring of 1967, nearly half a million protesters of all ages gathered in New York’s Central Park. Shouting “Burn cards, not people” and “Hell, no, we won’t go!” hundreds tossed their draft cards into a bonfire. Many in the park were protesting for the first time. A housewife from New Jersey told a reporter, “So many of us are frustrated. We want to criticize this war because we think it’s wrong, but we want to do it in the framework of loyalty.”

### HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

#### “THE BALLAD OF THE GREEN BERETS”

Not every Vietnam-era pop song about war was an antiwar song. At the top of the charts for five weeks in 1966 was “The Ballad of the Green Berets” by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler of the U.S. Army Special Forces, known as the Green Berets:

*Fighting soldiers from the sky,  
Fearless men who jump and die,  
Men who mean just what they say,  
The brave men of the Green Beret.*

The recording sold over a million copies in its first two weeks of release and was *Billboard* magazine’s song of the year.

THINK

C. Analysis

Motives

For what reasons

did the protesters

oppose the

Vietnam War?

C. Answer

Why did protesters

feel that the war

had no business

there, that it was

neglecting other

parts of the

world, and that

acting in a

moral way

was the

right way?



Others were more radical in their view. David Harris, who would spend 20 months in jail for refusing to serve in Vietnam, explained his motives.

**A PERSONAL VOICE**

Theoretically, I can accept the notion that there are circumstances in which you have to kill people. I could not accept the notion that Vietnam was one of those circumstances. And to me that left the option of either sitting by and watching what was an enormous injustice . . . or find some way to commit myself against it. And the position that I felt comfortable with in committing myself against it was total noncooperation—I was not going to be part of the machine.

DAVID HARRIS, quoted in *The War Within*



In a scene that grew more common as the Vietnam War dragged on, antiwar demonstrators in the United States confront military police.

Draft resistance continued from 1967 until President Nixon phased out the draft in the early 1970s. During these years, the U.S. government accused more than 200,000 men of draft offenses and imprisoned nearly 4,000 draft resisters. (Most won parole after 6 to 12 months behind bars, while some served four or five years.) Throughout these years, about 10,000 Americans fled to Canada rather than serve in the military.

In October of 1967, a demonstration at Washington's Lincoln Memorial drew about 75,000 protesters, including well-known figures like the poet Robert Lowell and the novelist Norman Mailer. When the speeches ended, about 30,000 demonstrators locked arms for a march on the Pentagon in order "to disrupt the center of the American war machine," as one organizer explained. As hundreds of protesters broke past the military police and mounted the Pentagon steps, they were met by tear gas and truncheons. About 1,500 demonstrators were injured and at least 700 arrested.

**WAR DIVIDES THE NATION** By 1967, Americans increasingly found themselves divided into two camps regarding the war. Those who strongly opposed the war and believed the United States should withdraw were known as **doves**. Feeling just as strongly that America should unleash a greater show of military force to end the war were the **hawks**.

Despite the visibility of the antiwar protesters, a majority of American citizens in 1967 still remained committed to the war. In May of that year, a prowar march through the streets of Manhattan drew 20,000 people. During this time, a poll showed that two-thirds of Americans still felt that the war was justified. And while only 10 percent of Americans approved of the administration's present level of commitment in Vietnam, about 50 percent felt that "increased attacks" against North Vietnam would help win the war.

Others, while less certain about the U.S. role in Vietnam, were shocked to see protesters publicly criticize a war in which their fellow Americans were fighting and dying. A poll taken in December of 1967 showed that 70 percent of Americans believed the war protests were "acts of disloyalty." A firefighter



An American antiwar poster is a parody of the World War I Uncle Sam poster, "I Want You for the U.S. Army."

**WAR HISTORY**  
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 for a  
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 the war.



This sign reflects the view of many Americans that the antiwar protests undermined the war effort in Vietnam.

who lost his son in Vietnam articulated the bitter feelings a number of Americans felt toward the antiwar movement.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

I'm bitter. . . . It's people like us who give up our sons for the country. . . . The college types, the professors, they go to Washington and tell the government what to do. . . . But their sons, they don't end up in the swamps over there, in Vietnam. No sir. They're deferred, because they're in school. Or they get sent to safe places. . . . What bothers me about the peace crowd is that you can tell from their attitude, the way they look and what they say, that they don't really love this country.

A FIREFIGHTER, quoted in *Working Class War*

Responding to antiwar posters, Americans who supported the government's Vietnam policy developed their own slogans: "Support our men in Vietnam" and "America—love it or leave it."

**JOHNSON REMAINS DETERMINED** Throughout the turmoil and division that engulfed the country during the early years of the war, President Johnson remained firm. Attacked by doves for not withdrawing and by hawks for not increasing military power rapidly enough, Johnson continued his policy of slow escalation.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

There has always been confusion, frustration, and difference of opinion in this country, when there is a war going on. . . . You know what President Roosevelt went through, and President Wilson in World War I. He had some senators from certain areas that gave him serious problems until victory was assured. . . . We are going to have these differences. No one likes war. All people love peace. But you can't have freedom without defending it.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON, quoted in *No Hail, No Farewell*

Johnson dismissed as "nervous nellies" members of Congress and other officials who questioned his war policies. As for the protesters who paraded outside his window, the president saw them as misguided and misinformed. They "wouldn't know a Communist if they tripped over one," he declared.

However, by the end of 1967, Johnson's policy—and the continuing stalemate—had begun to create turmoil within his own administration. In November, Defense Secretary McNamara, a key architect of U.S. escalation in Vietnam, quietly announced he was resigning to become head of the World Bank. "It didn't add up," McNamara recalled later. "What I was trying to find out was how . . . the war went on year after year when we stopped the infiltration [from North Vietnam] or shrunk it and when we had a very high body count and so on. It just didn't make sense."

As it happened, McNamara's resignation came on the threshold of the most tumultuous year of the sixties. In 1968 the war—and Johnson's presidency—would take a drastic turn for the worse.

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# 1968: A Tumultuous Year

## TERMS & NAMES

- Tet offensive
- Clark Clifford
- Robert Kennedy
- Eugene McCarthy
- Hubert Humphrey
- George Wallace

**LEARN ABOUT** the Tet offensive, the assassination of two national leaders, and the rioting at the Democratic National Convention  
**TO UNDERSTAND** why 1968 stands out as the most explosive year of the 1960s.

## ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

Early in the morning of June 5, 1968, John Lewis, the first chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, fell to the floor and wept. Robert F. Kennedy, a leading Democratic candidate for president, had just been fatally shot. Lewis had strongly supported Kennedy, feeling that the candidate was “serious in his commitment to civil rights—you felt it was coming out of his gut, really.” Two months earlier, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had fallen victim to an assassin’s bullet, Lewis had told himself he still had Kennedy. And now they both were gone. Lewis, who later became a congressman from Georgia, recalled the lasting impact of these traumatic events from 1968.

### A PERSONAL VOICE

There are people today who are afraid, in a sense, to hope or to have hope again, because of what happened in . . . 1968. Something was taken from us. The type of leadership that we had in a sense invested in, that we had helped to make and to nourish, was taken from us. . . . Something died in all of us with those assassinations.

JOHN LEWIS, quoted in *From Camelot to Kent State*

While the violent deaths of King and Kennedy left many Americans numb, the assassinations were but two of the traumatic events that rocked the nation in 1968. From a shocking setback in Vietnam to a chaotic Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the events of 1968 made it the most tumultuous year of a turbulent decade.



John Lewis

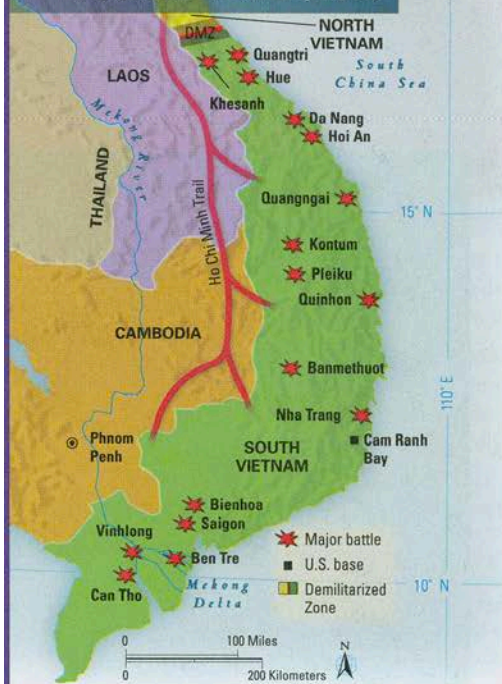
## The Tet Offensive Turns the War

The year 1968 began with a daring surprise attack by the Vietcong on numerous cities in South Vietnam. The simultaneous strikes, while a military defeat for the Communist guerrillas, stunned the American public and caused many people with moderate views to begin turning against the war.

**A SURPRISE ATTACK** January 30 was the Vietnamese equivalent of New Year’s Eve, the beginning of the lunar new year festivities known in Vietnam as Tet. Throughout that day in 1968, villagers—taking advantage of a week-long truce proclaimed for Tet—streamed into cities across South Vietnam to celebrate their New Year. At the time of the Tet celebration, many funerals were being held for victims of the war. Accompanying the funerals were the traditional firecrackers, flutes, and, of course, coffins.

As it turned out, the coffins contained weapons, and many of the villagers were Vietcong agents. That night the enemy launched an overwhelming attack on nearly 100 towns and cities in South Vietnam, as well as 12 U.S. air bases. The fighting was especially fierce in Saigon and in the former imperial capital of Hue. The Vietcong even attacked the U.S. embassy in Saigon, killing five Americans there. The **Tet offensive** continued for nearly a month before U.S. and South Vietnamese forces regained control of the cities.

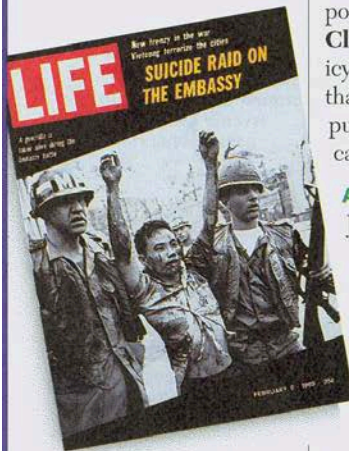
## Tet Offensive, Jan. 30–Feb. 24, 1968



### GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER

**LOCATION** What were the geographical destinations of the Tet offensive attacks?

**Skillbuilder Answer**  
They were scattered all across South Vietnam.



A *Life* magazine cover shows the capturing of a Vietcong guerrilla during the Tet offensive.

Cronkite, told his viewers that it now seemed “more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.” In a matter of weeks, the Tet offensive had changed millions of minds about the war.

Minds were also changing at the White House. To fill the defense secretary position left vacant by Robert McNamara’s resignation, Johnson picked **Clark Clifford**, a trusted friend and strong supporter of the president’s Vietnam policy. However, after settling in and studying the situation, Clifford concluded that the war was unwinnable. “We seem to have a sinkhole,” Clifford said. “We put in more—they match it. I see more and more fighting with more and more casualties on the U.S. side and no end in sight to the action.”

**A NATION TURNS ON JOHNSON** In the weeks following the Tet offensive, Johnson’s popularity plummeted. In public opinion polls taken at the end of February 1968, nearly 60 percent of the American public disapproved of the president’s handling of the war. Nearly half of the country now felt it had been a mistake to send American troops to Vietnam.

Even Dean Rusk, Johnson’s secretary of state and another principal architect of the war, acknowledged that the mood of America had changed significantly after Tet. “It was clear to me in the spring of ’68 that support for Vietnam at the grassroots level had changed,” Rusk recalled. “We had good support until that point, despite the campus demonstrations. War weariness eventually set in, and that was the watershed year.” Johnson recognized the change, too. Upon learning of Cronkite’s pessimistic analysis of the war, the president lamented, “If I’ve lost Walter, then it’s over. I’ve lost Mr. Average Citizen.”

General Westmoreland declared the attacks an overwhelming defeat for the Vietcong. The Communists’ “well-laid plans went awoul,” the general announced. He later added that “the enemy exposed himself by virtue of his strategy, and he suffered heavy casualties.” From a purely military standpoint, Westmoreland was right. The Vietcong lost about 32,000 soldiers during the month-long battle, while the American and ARVN forces lost little more than 3,000.

However, from a psychological—and political—standpoint, Westmoreland’s claim could not have been more wrong. Despite its overall military failure, the Tet offensive greatly shook an American public that had come to believe that the enemy was close to defeat. The Johnson administration’s credibility gap suddenly widened to a point from which it would never recover. Many Americans no longer believed the administration. The Pentagon’s continued reports of favorable body counts, or massive Vietcong casualties, now rang hollow as Americans saw the shocking images of attacks on South Vietnam’s major cities by an enemy that seemed to be everywhere.

**TET CHANGES PUBLIC OPINION** The aftershock from the Tet offensive reverberated throughout the United States, from its living rooms to its newsrooms to the White House. Despite the years of antiwar protest, a poll taken just before Tet showed that only 28 percent of Americans called themselves doves, while 56 percent claimed to be hawks. After Tet, both sides tallied 40 percent. The mainstream media, which had reported the war in a skeptical but generally balanced way, now openly criticized the war. One of the nation’s most respected journalists, Walter

### THINK TANK

**A. Analysis** Why did American public opinion change after the Tet offensive?

**A. Answer** Because the enemy seemed much stronger and more numerous than Americans thought.

## Days of Loss and Rage

The growing division over Vietnam led to a shocking political development in the spring of 1968, a season in which Americans also endured two assassinations, a series of urban riots, and a surge in college campus protests.

**JOHNSON WITHDRAWS** Well before the Tet offensive, an antiwar coalition within the Democratic Party had taken steps to unseat President Johnson. The group sought a Democratic candidate to challenge Johnson in the 1968 presidential primary election. **Robert Kennedy**, a senator from New York, decided not to run, citing party loyalty. However, in December of 1967, Minnesota senator **Eugene McCarthy** answered the group's call. McCarthy, a strong critic of the war, declared he would run against Johnson on a platform to end the war in Vietnam. "In every other great war of the century," McCarthy declared, "we have had the support of what is generally accepted as the decent opinion of mankind. We do not have that today."

McCarthy's early campaign attracted little notice, but in the weeks following Tet, it picked up steam. In the New Hampshire Democratic primary in March 1968, the little-known senator shocked the nation by capturing 42 percent of the vote. While Johnson won the primary with 48 percent of the vote, the slim margin of victory was viewed as a defeat for the president. Influenced by Johnson's perceived weakness at the polls, Robert Kennedy declared his candidacy for president. The Democratic Party had become a house divided.

On March 31, 1968, President Johnson responded to the growing division within his party and the country. In a televised address to the nation, Johnson announced a dramatic change in his Vietnam policy. The president declared that the United States would seek negotiations to end the war. In the meantime, the policy of U.S. escalation would end. The bombing of North Vietnam would eventually cease, and steps would be taken to ensure that the South Vietnamese played a larger role in the war.

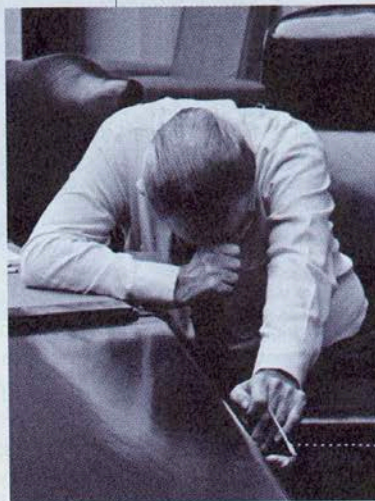
The president paused and then ended his speech with a statement that shocked the nation. Declaring that he did not want the presidency to become "involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year," Lyndon Johnson announced, "Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term of president." The president was stepping down from national politics, his grand plan for domestic reform done in by a costly and divisive war. "That . . . war," Johnson later admitted, "killed the lady I really loved—the Great Society."

**VIOLENCE AND PROTEST GRIP THE NATION** The Democrats—as well as the nation—were in for more shock in 1968. Johnson's startling announcement had barely sunk in when America was rocked by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4. In the wake of the civil rights leader's death, violence ripped through more than 100 U.S. cities as enraged people burned buildings and destroyed neighborhoods.

Violence and rage engulfed the nation's capital for several days, as rioters set more than 700 fires. Federal army troops in full combat gear were called in to protect the Capitol and the White House. By the end of the week, 21,000 federal troops and 34,000 National Guardsmen had been called upon to subdue the rioting across the country. When it was all over, 46 persons were dead, more than 3,000 were injured and some 27,000 were arrested.

Just two months later, a bullet cut down yet another popular national figure. By June of 1968, Robert Kennedy had become a strong candidate in the

The Vietnam War and the divisiveness it caused within America took its toll on Lyndon Johnson.

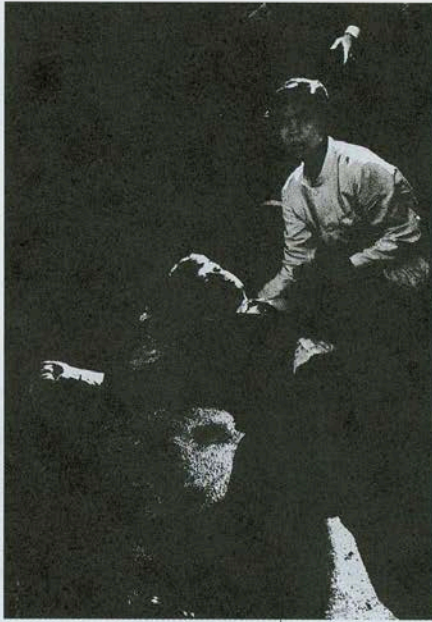


*"If I've lost  
Walter  
[Cronkite],  
then it's over.  
I've lost Mr.  
Average  
Citizen."*

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

**ANALYZING HISTORY**  
Analyzing  
Why did  
Johnson  
not to run  
again?

**LOWER** He  
loved that  
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and cause  
for turmoil  
divisiveness  
within the  
Party.



Hotel busboy Juan Romero was the first person to reach Robert Kennedy after he was shot. Kennedy had just won the California primary.

Democratic primary, drawing support heavily from minorities and urban Democratic voters. On June 4, Kennedy won the crucial California primary. Just after midnight, he gave a victory speech at a Los Angeles hotel. On his way out of the hotel, he passed through the hotel's kitchen. A young Palestinian immigrant, Sirhan Sirhan, was hiding in the kitchen with a gun. Sirhan, who later said he was angered by Kennedy's support of Israel, fatally shot the senator.

Jack Newfield, a speechwriter for Kennedy, described the anguish he and many Americans felt over the loss of two of the nation's leaders.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

Things were not really getting better . . . we shall *not* overcome. . . . We had already glimpsed the most compassionate leaders our nation could produce, and they had all been assassinated. And from this time forward, things would get worse. Our best political leaders were part of memory now, not hope.

JACK NEWFIELD, quoted in *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*

Meanwhile, the nation's college campuses continued to erupt in protest. During the first six months of 1968, almost 40,000 students on more than 100 campuses took part in 221 major demonstrations. While many of the demonstrations continued to target U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War—which reached a peak of 536,000 American military personnel—students also clashed with university officials over campus and social issues. A massive student protest at Columbia University in New York City held the nation's attention for a week in April. There, students protesting the university's community policies took over several buildings. Police eventually restored order and arrested nearly 900 protesters.

Recalling the violence and turmoil that seemed to plague the nation in 1968, the journalist and historian Garry Wills wrote, "There was a sense everywhere . . . that things were giving way. That [people] had not only lost control of [their] history, but might never regain it."

## A Turbulent Race for President

The chaos and violence of 1968 climaxed in Chicago. Thousands of antiwar demonstrators converged on the city to protest at the Democratic National Convention in August of that year. The convention, which featured a bloody riot between protesters and police, fractured the Democratic Party and thus helped a nearly forgotten Republican win the White House.

**TURMOIL IN CHICAGO** With Lyndon Johnson stepping down and Robert Kennedy gone, the 1968 Democratic presidential primary race pitted Eugene McCarthy against Vice-President **Hubert Humphrey**. McCarthy, while still popular with the nation's antiwar segment, had little chance of defeating Humphrey, a loyal party man who had President Johnson's support. During the last week of August, the Democrats met at their convention in Chicago supposedly to choose a candidate. In reality, Humphrey's nomination had already been determined, a decision that upset many antiwar activists.

As the delegates arrived in Chicago, so too did nearly 10,000 protesters. Led by men such as SDS veteran Tom Hayden, many demonstrators sought to pressure the Democrats into adopting an antiwar platform. Others came to voice their displeasure with Humphrey's nomination. Still others, known as Yippies (members of the Youth International Party), had come hoping to provoke violence that might discredit the Democratic Party. Chicago's Mayor Richard J.

THE 1968  
C. ANNE  
JANUARY 19  
1968 COME  
AS A NEW  
COMER IN  
AMERICA  
C. ANNE  
NATION AND  
BE A SOURCE  
OF INSPIR  
FROM THE  
WAR TO AN  
CAMPAIGN  
EVER TO BE  
WITH THE  
ASSASSIN  
DIED IN THE  
PRIMARY  
LEADER



Chicago police attempt to disperse antiwar demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic convention. Protesters shouted, "The whole world is watching!"

Daley was determined to keep the protesters under control. With memories of the nationwide riots after King's death still fresh, Daley mobilized 12,000 Chicago police officers and 5,000 National Guardsmen. "As long as I am mayor," Daley vowed, "there will be law and order."

Order, however, soon collapsed. On August 28, as delegates cast votes for Humphrey, chaos engulfed the downtown park where the protesters had gathered to march on the convention. With television cameras focused on them, police moved into the crowd, sprayed the protesters with Mace and beat them with nightsticks. Many protesters tried to flee, while others retaliated, pelting the riot-helmeted police with rocks and bottles. "The whole world is watching!" protesters shouted, as police attacked demonstrators and bystanders alike.

The rioting soon spilled out of the park and into the downtown streets. One nearby hotel, observed a *New York Times* reporter, became a makeshift aid station.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

Demonstrators, reporters, McCarthy workers, doctors, all began to stagger into the Hilton lobby, blood streaming from face and head wounds. The lobby smelled from tear gas, and stink bombs dropped by the Yippies. A few people began to direct the wounded to a makeshift hospital on the fifteenth floor, the McCarthy staff headquarters.

J. ANTHONY LUKAS, quoted in *Decade of Shocks*

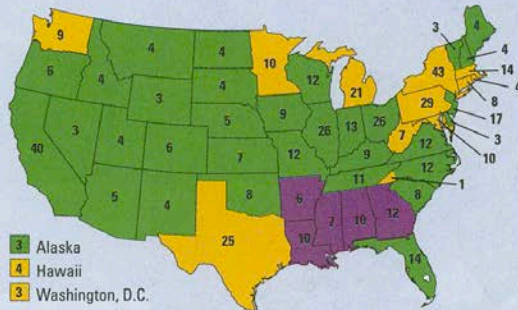
Disorder of a different kind reigned inside the convention hall, where delegates bitterly debated an antiwar plank in the party platform. When word of the riot filtered into the hall, delegates angrily shouted at Daley, who returned their shouts with equal vigor. The whole world indeed was watching—on their televisions. The images of the Democrats—both inside and outside the convention hall—as a party of disorder became etched in the minds of millions of Americans.

**NIXON TRIUMPHS** A person who benefited from this turmoil was Republican presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon. By 1968, Nixon had achieved one of the greatest political comebacks in American politics. After his loss to Kennedy

## Election of 1968

### ELECTORAL AND POPULAR VOTES

Party	Candidate	Electoral votes	Popular votes
Republican	Richard M. Nixon	301	31,785,480
Democratic	Hubert H. Humphrey	191	31,275,166
American Independent	George C. Wallace	46	9,906,473



#### SKILLBUILDER

#### INTERPRETING

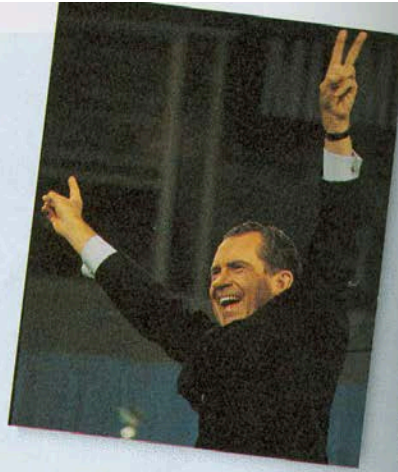
**TABLES** By how many percentage points did Nixon defeat Humphrey in the popular vote? How large was Nixon's electoral vote victory?

**Skillbuilder Answers**  
**Percent:** Less than one percent (0.7) **Electoral:** 110 votes

Republicans win back 47 House seats and 3 Senate seats from Democrats. In 1968, Nixon announced his candidacy for president, and on the strength of his many Republican alliances, as well as his voter appeal, he won the party's nomination.

During the presidential race, Nixon campaigned on a promise to restore law and order, which appealed to many middle-class Americans fed up with years of riots and protests. He also promised, in vague but appealing terms, to end the war in Vietnam. Nixon's candidacy was helped by the entry of former Alabama governor **George Wallace** into the race. Wallace, a Democrat running as an independent, was a longtime champion of school segregation and states' rights. Labeled the "white backlash" candidate, Wallace captured five Southern states. In addition, he attracted a surprisingly high number of Northern white working-class voters disgusted with inner-city riots and antiwar protests.

In the end, Nixon defeated Humphrey by more than 100 electoral votes, despite capturing only 43 percent of the popular vote. By winning the presidency, Richard Nixon inherited the quagmire in Vietnam. He eventually would end America's involvement in Vietnam, but not before his war policies created even more protest and uproar within the country.



Richard M. Nixon flashes a victory signal on his way to winning the 1968 Republican nomination for president. Referring to recent years of turmoil, Nixon declared, "We have endured a long night. . . . Let us gather the light."

in the presidential race of 1960, Nixon tasted defeat again in 1962 when he ran for governor of California. His political career all but dead, Nixon joined a New York law firm. However, he never strayed far from politics. In 1966, Nixon campaigned vigorously for Republican candidates in congressional elections, helping

**D. Answer:** Democrats disunity, law and order stance, his end the war in Vietnam, the entry of George Wallace into the race.  
**Text:** Nixon  
**D. Answer:** Causes the factors with Nixon's



## ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

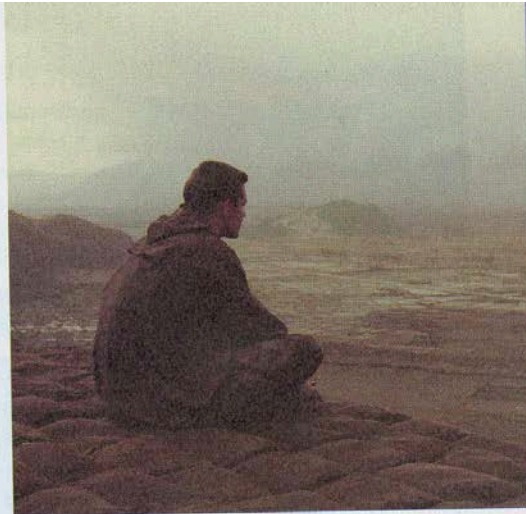
Alfred S. Bradford served in Vietnam from September 1968 to August 1969. A member of the 25th Infantry Division, he was awarded several medals, including the Purple Heart, given to soldiers wounded in battle. Bradford went on to teach history at the universities of Missouri and Oklahoma. One day, Bradford's eight-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, inquired about his experience in Vietnam. "Daddy, why did you do it?" she asked. Bradford recalled what he told himself.

### A PERSONAL VOICE

Vietnam was my generation's adventure. I wanted to be part of that adventure and I believed that it was my duty as an American, both to serve my country and particularly not to stand by while someone else risked his life in my place. I do not regret my decision to go, but I learned in Vietnam not to confuse America with the politicians elected to administer America, even when they claim they are speaking for America, and I learned that I have a duty to myself and to my country to exercise my own judgment based upon my own conscience.

ALFRED S. BRADFORD, quoted in *Some Even Volunteered*

Bradford's mixed view of the war reflected the range of emotions many veterans felt about their service in Vietnam. The war left a deep and lasting impression on many Americans, from soldiers such as Bradford to citizens who did not serve. Richard Nixon had promised in 1968 to end the war, but it would take nearly five more years—and over 20,000 more American deaths—to end the nation's involvement in Vietnam. The legacy of the war was profound, as it dramatically affected the way Americans viewed their government and the world.



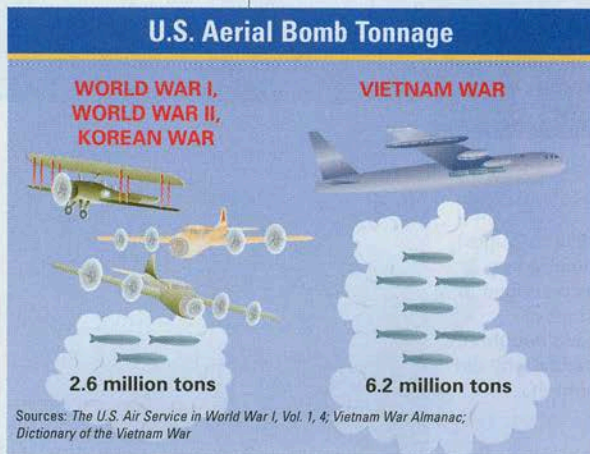
A U.S. soldier sits near Quang Tri, Vietnam, during a break in the fighting.

## President Nixon and Vietnamization

In the summer of 1969, recently elected president Richard Nixon announced the first U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam. "We have to get rid of the nightmares we inherited," Nixon later told reporters. "One of the nightmares is war without end." However, as Nixon pulled out American troops, he continued the war against North Vietnam to achieve what he called "peace with honor"—a policy that some critics would charge prolonged the "war without end" for several more bloody years.

**THE PULLOUT BEGINS** As President Nixon settled into the White House in January of 1969, negotiations begun by the Johnson administration to end the war in Vietnam were going nowhere. During the peace talks in Paris, the warring factions argued over everything—including the shape of the negotiating table. The United States and South Vietnam insisted that all North Vietnamese forces withdraw from the South and that the government of Nguyen Van Thieu, then South Vietnam's ruler, remain in power. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong demanded that U.S. troops withdraw from South Vietnam and that the Thieu government step aside for a coalition government that would include the Vietcong.

In the midst of the stalled negotiations, Nixon announced his strategy to end America's involvement in Vietnam. Known as **Vietnamization**, the plan called for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops in order for the South Vietnamese to take on a more active combat role in the war. By August of 1969, the first 25,000 U.S. troops had returned home from Vietnam. Over the next three years, the number of American troops in Vietnam dropped from more than 500,000 to less than 25,000.



Sources: *The U.S. Air Service in World War I*, Vol. 1, 4; *Vietnam War Almanac*; *Dictionary of the Vietnam War*

**SKILLBUILDER**  
**INTERPRETING CHARTS**  
 What does the chart show about the type of war the U.S. fought in Vietnam?

**Skillbuilder Answer**  
 Possible response: The chart shows that the United States relied heavily on air power to defeat the Vietcong; the U.S. may have figured that a massive and unrelenting bombing campaign would greatly help in its strategy to demoralize the enemy.

**"PEACE WITH HONOR"** However, part of Nixon's Vietnamization policy was aimed at establishing what he called a "peace with honor." Nixon intended to maintain U.S. dignity in the face of its withdrawal from war. A further goal was the preservation of U.S. clout at the negotiation table, as President Nixon still demanded that the South Vietnamese government remain intact. With this objective—and even as the pullout had begun—Nixon secretly ordered a massive bombing campaign against supply routes and bases in North Vietnam. The president also ordered that bombs be dropped on the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia, which held a number of Vietcong sanctuaries. Nixon told aide H. R. Haldeman that he wanted the enemy to believe he was capable of anything.

**A PERSONAL VOICE**

I call it the madman theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do *anything* to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that "for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communists. We can't restrain him when he's angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button . . ."—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.

RICHARD M. NIXON, quoted in *The Price of Power*

A. And with troops mainly American and dig well as negoti position  
 how the A. Some What is of Nixon with his Vietnam

## Trouble Continues on the Home Front

Seeking to win support for his war policies, Richard Nixon appealed to what he called the **silent majority**—moderate, mainstream Americans who quietly supported the president's strategy. To be sure, many average Americans did support the president. However, the events of the war continued to divide the country.

**THE MY LAI MASSACRE** In November of 1969, Americans learned of a shocking event. That month, *New York Times* correspondent Seymour Hersh reported that on March 16, 1968, a U.S. platoon under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, Jr., entered the small village of My Lai in northern South Vietnam in search of Vietcong rebels. Finding no sign of the enemy, the troops rounded up the villagers and shot them. In all, the soldiers massacred more than 100 innocent Vietnamese—mostly women and children. "We huddled them up," recalled 22-year-old Private Paul Meadlo. "I poured about four clips into the group. . . . The mothers was hugging their children. . . . Well, we kept right on firing."

The troops insisted that they were following Lieutenant Calley's orders. When asked what his directive had been, one soldier answered, "Kill anything that breathed." Twenty-five army officers were charged with involve-

ment in the massacre and subsequent cover-up, but only Calley was convicted and imprisoned.

The My Lai massacre shook the nation. *Time* magazine called the incident “an American tragedy,” and *Newsweek* appeared to capture the mood of the nation with its headline “A Single Incident in a Brutal War Shocks the American Conscience.”

**THE INVASION OF CAMBODIA** Despite the shock over My Lai, however, the country’s mood by 1970 seemed to be growing less explosive. American troops were on their way home, and it appeared that the war was finally winding down. Indeed, a *New York Times* survey of college campuses in 1969 had revealed that many students were shifting their attention from the antiwar movement to the environment.

Then on April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced that U.S. troops had invaded Cambodia. The “incursion” into Cambodia was launched, Nixon declared, to clear out North Vietnamese and Vietcong supply centers. Addressing potential critics, the president defended his action: “If when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation . . . acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations . . . throughout the world.”

Upon hearing of the invasion, college students across the country erupted in protest. In what became the first general student strike in the nation’s history, more than 1.5 million students closed down some 1,200 campuses. The president of Columbia University called the month that followed the Cambodian invasion “the most disastrous month of May in the history of higher education.”

**KENT STATE** Disaster struck hardest at Kent State University in Ohio, where a massive student protest led to the burning of the ROTC building. In response to the growing unrest, the local mayor called in the National Guard. On May 4, 1970, the guards fired into a crowd of campus protesters who were hurling rocks at them. The gunfire wounded nine people and killed four, including two who had not even participated in the rally.

Ten days later, similar violence rocked the mostly all-black college of Jackson State in Mississippi. National Guardsmen there confronted a group of antiwar demonstrators and fired on the crowd after several bottles were thrown. In the hail of bullets, 12 students were wounded and 2 were killed, both innocent bystanders.

In a sign that America still remained sharply divided about the war, the country hotly debated the campus shootings. Polls indicated that many Americans supported the National Guard; respondents claimed that the students “got what they were asking for.” The weeks following the campus turmoil brought new attention to a group known as “hardhats,” construction workers and other blue-collar Americans who supported the U.S. government’s war policies. In May of 1970, nearly 100,000 members of the Building and Construction Trades Council of New York held a rally outside city hall to support the government.

**THE PENTAGON PAPERS** Nixon’s Cambodia policy, however, cost him significant political support. By first bombing and then invading Cambodia without



Mary Ann Vecchio grieves over the body of Jeffrey Glenn Miller, a 20-year-old student shot by National Guard troops at Kent State.

even notifying Congress, the president stirred anger on Capitol Hill. On December 31, 1970, Congress repealed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which had given the president near independence in conducting policy in Vietnam.

Support for the war eroded even further when in June of 1971 former Defense Department worker Daniel Ellsberg leaked what became known as the **Pentagon Papers**. The 7,000-page document, written for Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, revealed among other things that the government drew up plans for entering the war even as President Lyndon Johnson promised that he would not send American troops to Vietnam. Furthermore, the papers showed that there was never any plan to end the war as long as the North Vietnamese persisted.

For many Americans, the Pentagon Papers confirmed their belief that the government had not been honest about its war intentions. The document, while not particularly damaging to the Nixon administration, supported what opponents of the war had been saying.

## KEY PLAYER



**HENRY KISSINGER**  
1923–

Henry Kissinger fled Germany with his family in 1938, to escape the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Kissinger, who helped negotiate America's withdrawal from Vietnam and who later would help forge historic new relations with China and the Soviet Union, held a deep interest in the concept of power. "You know," he once noted, "most of these world leaders, you wouldn't want to know socially. Mostly they are intellectual mediocrities. The thing that is interesting about them is . . . their power."

At first, Kissinger seemed an unlikely candidate to work for Richard Nixon. During the 1968 presidential campaign, Kissinger declared, "That man Nixon is not fit to be president." However, the two would become trusted colleagues. In August of 1974, two days before Nixon resigned as president amid the Watergate political scandal, he summoned Kissinger to the Lincoln Sitting Room upstairs in the White House. There, the two men reportedly knelt together, prayed, and then embraced.

## America's Longest War Ends

In March of 1972, the North Vietnamese launched their largest attack on South Vietnam since the Tet offensive in 1968. President Nixon responded by ordering a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnamese cities, and the mining of Haiphong's harbor, into which Soviet and Chinese supply ships sailed. The Communists "have never been bombed like they are going to be bombed this time," Nixon vowed. The bombings halted the North Vietnamese attack, but the grueling stalemate continued. It was after this that the Nixon administration took steps to finally end America's involvement in Vietnam.

**"PEACE IS AT HAND"** By the middle of 1972, the country's growing social division and the looming presidential election prompted the Nixon administration to change its negotiating policy in Paris. Polls showed that more than 60 percent of Americans in 1971 felt that the United States should withdraw all troops from Vietnam by the end of the year.

**Henry Kissinger**, the president's adviser for national security affairs, served as Nixon's top negotiator in Vietnam. Kissinger, a German emigrant who had earned three degrees from Harvard, was an expert on international relations. Since 1969, Kissinger had been meeting privately with North Vietnam's chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho. Eventually, Kissinger dropped his insistence on the removal of all North Vietnamese troops from the South before the complete withdrawal of American troops. On October 26, 1972, one week before the presidential election, Kissinger announced, "Peace is at hand."

**THE FINAL PUSH** President Nixon won reelection, but the promised peace proved to be elusive. The Thieu regime, alarmed at the prospect of North Vietnamese troops stationed in South Vietnam, rejected Kissinger's plan. Talks broke off on December 16, and two days later, the president unleashed a ferocious bombing campaign against Hanoi and Haiphong, the two largest cities in North Vietnam. In what became known as the "Christmas bombings," U.S. planes dropped 100,000 bombs for 11 straight days, pausing only on Christmas Day.

At this point, calls to end the war resounded from the halls of Congress as well as from Beijing and Moscow. Everyone, it seemed, had finally grown weary of the war. The warring parties returned to the

**POWS/MIAS**

An issue that remains alive for many Americans concerns the thousands of soldiers who did not return home from Vietnam. In 1995, the Pentagon reported that there were still 2,202 American soldiers missing in action (MIA) in Southeast Asia—1,618 in Vietnam.

While far more Americans are listed as missing from the Korean War (8,170) and World War II (78,750), locating missing soldiers in Vietnam has taken on a particular intensity. One reason is that despite the Vietnamese government's denial, a number of Americans believe that some U.S. soldiers may still be alive in Vietnam.

The United States has established an MIA office in Hanoi, whose staff members attempt to locate the remains of missing Americans and track down leads about the possibility of surviving soldiers.



peace table, and on January 27, 1973, the United States signed an "agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam." Under the agreement, North Vietnamese troops would remain in South Vietnam, which had Nixon's promise to respond "with full force" to any violation of the peace agreement. On March 29, 1973, the last U.S. combat troops left for home. For America, the Vietnam War had ended.

**THE FALL OF SAIGON** The war itself, however, raged on. Within months of the United States' departure, the cease-fire agreement between North and South Vietnam collapsed. In March of 1975, after several years of fighting, the North Vietnamese launched a full-scale invasion against the South. Thieu appealed to the United States for help. America provided economic aid but refused to send troops.

President Gerald Ford, who entered the White House after the Watergate political scandal forced Richard Nixon out, captured the nation's mood during a speech in New Orleans: "America can regain its sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by re-fighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned." On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon and captured the city. Soon after, South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam.

How  
did the  
country  
react to  
the war?  
How well  
did the  
country  
recover?  
What  
lessons  
did the  
war have  
to offer?

**The War's Painful Legacy**

The Vietnam War exacted a terrible price from its participants. In all, 58,000 Americans were killed and some 365,000 were wounded. North and South Vietnamese deaths topped 1.5 million. In addition, the war left Southeast Asia highly unstable, which led to further war in Cambodia. In America, a nation attempted to come to grips with an unsuccessful war. In the end, the conflict in Vietnam left many Americans with a more cautious outlook on foreign affairs and a more cynical attitude toward their government.

**AMERICAN VETERANS COPE BACK HOME** While families welcomed home their sons and daughters, the nation as a whole extended a cold hand to its



Lieutenant Colonel Robert Stirn, a returning POW, receives a warm welcome from his family. The longest-held Vietnam POW was Lieutenant Everett Alvarez, Jr., of California. He was imprisoned for more than eight years.

## America's Longest War, 1964–1973

1964

• Congress passes Tonkin Gulf Resolution, giving president broad military powers in Vietnam; President Johnson begins bombing North Vietnam.

1965

• First U.S. ground troops arrive in Vietnam to begin fighting the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army.

1967

• Antiwar protests in the United States intensify.

1968

• Vietcong launch massive Tet offensive on numerous South Vietnamese cities.

returning Vietnam veterans. There were no brass bands, no victory parades, no cheering crowds. Instead, many veterans faced indifference or even hostility from an America still torn and bitter about the war. Lily Jean Lee Adams, who served as an army nurse in Vietnam, recalled arriving, while still in uniform, back at Oakland Army Base in 1970.

### A PERSONAL VOICE

In the bus terminal, people were staring at me and giving me dirty looks. I expected the people to smile, like, "Wow, she was in Vietnam, doing something for her country—wonderful." I felt like I had walked into another country, not my country. So I went into the ladies' room and changed.

LILY JEAN LEE ADAMS, quoted in *A Piece of My Heart*

Many Vietnam veterans readjusted successfully to civilian life. However, about 15 percent of the 3.3 million soldiers who served developed delayed stress syndrome. These veterans had recurring nightmares about their war experience. Many suffered from severe headaches and memory lapses. Some veterans became highly apathetic, while others began abusing drugs or alcohol. Several thousand even committed suicide.

In 1982, the U.S. government, in an effort to honor the men and women who served in Vietnam, unveiled the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The memorial consists of two black granite walls inscribed with the names of all the Americans who died in the war or who were then still listed as missing in action. Many Vietnam veterans, as well as their loved ones, have found visiting the memorial a deeply moving, even healing experience.

**FURTHER TURMOIL IN SOUTHEAST ASIA** The end of the Vietnam War ushered in a new period of violence and chaos in Southeast Asia. In unifying Vietnam, the Communists initially held out a conciliatory hand to the South Vietnamese. "You have nothing to fear," declared Colonel Bui Tin of the North Vietnamese Army.

However, the Communists soon imprisoned more than 400,000 South Vietnamese in harsh "reeducation," or labor, camps. As the Communists imposed their rule throughout the land, nearly 1.5 million people fled Vietnam. They included citizens who had supported the U.S. war effort, as well as business owners, whom the Communists expelled when they began nationalizing the country's business sector.

Also fleeing the country was a large group of poor Vietnamese, known as boat people because they left on anything from freighters to barges to rowboats. Their efforts to reach safety across the South China Sea often met with tragedy, as nearly 50,000 perished on the high seas due to exposure, drowning, illness, or piracy.

The people of Cambodia also suffered greatly after the war. The U. S. invasion of Cambodia had unleashed a brutal civil war, in which a Communist group known as the **Khmer Rouge** seized power in 1975. In an effort to transform the country into a peasant society, the Khmer Rouge

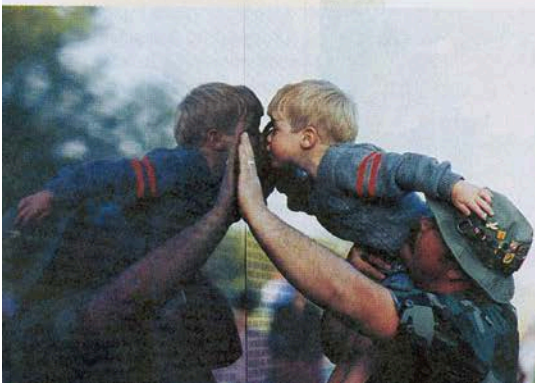


### HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

#### VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL: THE WALL

Shortly after 1980, a national competition was held to determine the Vietnam memorial's design. Maya Ying Lin, *above*, a 20-year-old architecture student of Chinese descent, submitted the winning design—a long, black granite wall on which are etched the names of the men and women who died or are missing in action, *below*.

"I didn't want a static object that people would just look at," Lin said, "but something they could relate to as on a journey, or passage, that would bring each to his own conclusions." Lin's design became known simply as the Wall.



1970

peace talks begin in Paris; President Nixon announces Vietnamization of troops; gradual withdrawal of troops.

1972

President Nixon orders invasion of Cambodia to destroy enemy supply bases; American college campuses erupt in protest.

1973

United States and North Vietnam sign a truce; the U.S. withdraws the last of its troops from Vietnam.

executed many government officials and academics. During its reign of terror, the Khmer Rouge is believed to have killed as many as 2 million Cambodians.

**VIETNAM'S EFFECT ON AMERICA** Even after it ended, the Vietnam War remained a subject of great controversy for Americans. Many hawks continued to insist that the war could have been won if the U.S. had employed more military power. They also blamed the antiwar movement at home for destroying American morale. Doves countered that the North Vietnamese had displayed incredible resiliency and that an increase in U.S. military force would have resulted only in a continuing stalemate. In addition, doves argued that an unrestrained war against North Vietnam might have prompted a military reaction from China or the Soviet Union.

The war resulted in several major U.S. policy changes. First, the government abolished the draft, which had stirred so much antiwar sentiment. The country also took steps to curb the president's war-making powers. In November 1973, Congress passed the **War Powers Act**, which stipulated that a president must inform Congress within 48 hours if U.S. forces are sent into a hostile area without a declaration of war. In addition, the troops may remain there no longer than 90 days unless Congress approves the president's actions or declares war.

In a broader sense, the Vietnam War significantly altered America's views on foreign policy. In what has been labeled the Vietnam syndrome, Americans now pause and consider possible risks to their own interests before deciding whether to intervene in the affairs of other nations.

Finally, the war contributed to an overall cynicism in Americans about their government and political leaders that persists today. Americans grew suspicious of a government that had provided so much misleading information—as the Johnson administration did—or concealed so many activities—as the Nixon administration did. Coupled with the Watergate scandal of the mid 1970s, the war diminished the optimism and faith in government that Americans felt during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years.

## NOW & THEN

### U.S. RECOGNITION OF VIETNAM

In July of 1995, more than 20 years after the Vietnam War ended, the United States extended full diplomatic relations to Vietnam. In announcing the resumption of ties with Vietnam, President Bill Clinton declared, "Let this moment . . . be a time to heal and a time to build." Demonstrating how the war still divides Americans, the president's decision drew both praise and criticism from members of Congress and veterans' groups.

In an ironic twist, Clinton nominated as ambassador to Vietnam a former prisoner of war from the Vietnam War, Douglas Peterson, a congress member from Florida. Peterson, a former air force pilot, was shot down over North Vietnam in 1966 and spent six and a half years in a Hanoi prison.

How Many Americans had foreign affairs more seriously and grew more vocal of their government and political leaders.

**CRITICAL HISTORY** Recognizing the Vietnam War's impact on American attitudes?